

Examining language development and revitalisation initiatives: The case of the Bidayuh language in Sarawak

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Abstract

This article examines development and revitalisation initiatives for the Bidayuh language, spoken in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Bidayuh has six main variants which are not mutually intelligible. In addition, it is mainly used in rural settings and is not the main language of choice in mixed marriages. Moreover, Bidayuh did not have a standardised orthography until 2003. These factors have affected the development of the language, which is to be contrasted with the Iban language, spoken by the main ethnic group in Sarawak, which is currently offered in primary schools as Pupil's Own Language (POL) and as an elective subject in the secondary school *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination. The focus of this article is the language development and revitalization initiatives undertaken by various stakeholders between 1963 (the year of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia) and today. Special focus will be given to the outcome of the Multilingual Education (MLE) project, which is an extension of the Bidayuh Language Development Project (BLDP) initiated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Asia, and undertaken by the Summer Institute of Linguistic (SIL) and the Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA). Interviews with representatives of the community were conducted to discover their perceptions towards these initiatives, and to identify factors that might contribute to their success and/or failure. The article ends with some suggestions about how to improve the success of language revitalisation initiatives for Bidayuh.

Keywords: Indigenous language - revitalization initiatives - Bidayuh language – Sarawak - Iban

1. Introduction

Eberhard et al. (2019) list 134 living languages in Malaysia, of which 95 are considered to be threatened, while 15 are dying (Simon & Charles, 2018), a rather gloomy picture of language endangerment across the country. Furthermore, many of the languages listed as threatened are indigenous languages¹ spoken in the states of Sarawak and Sabah, on the island of Borneo.

¹ Indigenous languages of Malaysia other than Malay are the languages of the Orang Asli in peninsula Malaysia and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak (Asmah, 2017: 20), such as the Kadazan and Bajau in Sabah, and the Iban and Bidayuh in Sarawak. Asmah (2004) suggests that of the 30 to 40 languages spoken in Sarawak at least 25 are indigenous languages, whereas in Sabah, 33 of 50 are indigenous.